

Institutions that ought to be closed down

4. University of Wales, Swansea

A Correspondence

to
The Vice Chancellor
University of Wales, Swansea
Singleton Park, Swansea. SA2 8PP

copy to
Mrs Anne Edwards, Secretary
Dept of Philosophy

from
Edgeway Books
The Stonehouse
Bishopstone HR4 7JE

2.2.04

Dear Professor Davies,

I am told that the Swansea Philosophy Department is to be closed. Philosophy is the heart of any university and how any institution can call itself a university without philosophy I can hardly imagine. As it happens, over the last half century or so the Swansea department has been very distinguished, the only department in the Swansea arts faculty to rise far above the ordinary provincial university level. I report this not only as common knowledge but as a judgement I was well placed to make for more than thirty years, having had numbers of friends in that department from Rush Rhees and Peter Winch onwards, and having for years worked in a department that had a specially designed joint honours degree with Philosophy, which numbers of graduates would say was a genuine university education.

The closure of the department cannot fail to signal that University of Wales Swansea is, as the newspapers say, dumbing itself down; and when the better sixth-form teachers realise what has happened this cannot fail to have an adverse impact on the quality of student applications to the surviving departments.

yours sincerely

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 8

Ian Robinson

(Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in the University College of Swansea
English Department 1961-1997)

to

Ian Robinson

from P. A. to the Vice-Chancellor

12.2.04

Dear Mr Robinson

The Vice-Chancellor thanks you for your letter of 2 February 2004 concerning the possible closure of the Philosophy Department at Swansea University.

There has been extensive debate within the University since October 2003 over plans to accelerate progress towards achieving the University Council's aspiration of world-class excellence. These Strategic Directions proposals include strategic investment in strong growth areas and disinvestment from a number of other academic areas. The criteria to be used for selecting areas for investment and disinvestment were included in these consultations.

The debate has now moved on to the precise academic areas of the University for investment and disinvestment. Philosophy is one of the departments recommended for phasing out as a result of this review. A final decision is expected by the University Council in March following a period of further debate.

This background is important because the proposal to phase out Philosophy must be seen within this broader strategic context. The University currently has a far larger number of academic areas than competitors of a similar size. This results in some very small departments, which are insufficiently robust to ensure a quality educational experience for students and to ensure a strong and vibrant research environment.

The Vice-Chancellor has emphasised that the specific recommendations are not a criticism of individual staff in any department. All departments, in Swansea are good but good is not good enough; we have to focus on excellence.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Margaret Hill

to

P. A. to the Vice-Chancellor

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 8

from
Ian Robinson

Dear Madam,

Thank you for your letter of 12 February 2004 which, if it represents official thinking at University of Wales Swansea, proves beyond reasonable doubt that it is not Philosophy at Swansea that should be shut down but the whole university. The Council, you say, has aspirations of “world class excellence”. “All departments in Swansea are good but good is not good enough: we have to focus on excellence.” In the Swansea Arts faculty there are two departments with something of a national reputation, including the one to be shut. The notion that the institution will by way of some reorganization become “world-class” is so bizarre as to raise doubts not only about the competence of its officers but about their sanity. Oxford, the Sorbonne, Harvard, Swansea: pick the odd one out in this list. It is similarly insane to suppose that a university can attain excellence as a university by dumbing itself down. “Insufficiently robust to ensure a quality educational experience ... and to ensure a strong and vibrant research environment”—one certain thing is that no student in any department of an institution that uses such language will ever be educated at all and no genuine research—which is a set of forms of thinking—will ever get done. When sales-talk becomes the official speech of a university what has happened to it? Anyone in the Philosophy department could answer the question. Perhaps that is why they are to be shut down: inconvenient survivals of the real university.

yours faithfully,

Ian Robinson, formerly senior lecturer